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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ABUJA 000386

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [KIRF](#) [NI](#)

SUBJECT: NIGERIA: POSSIBLE SHI'ITE PERSECUTION IN SOKOTO
STATE

Classified By: Political Counselor Walter N.S. Pflaumer for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY. Poloffs traveled to Sokoto State on February 24-26 and met with members of the state government, non-governmental organizations, academics, and opposition parties. In many of these meetings, the issue of Sunni-Shi'a conflict in the state emerged as a theme. Though there was a full spectrum of opinions on the severity of the conflict and those ultimately behind it, it appears clear that Shi'ite homes are regularly demolished and that a large number of Shi'ites, and Shi'a leaders in particular, have been jailed by the current state administration. One contact, whom we believe credible and in a position to speak freely, termed the situation a "witch hunt" and "very dangerous." Others maintained that there was a need to restrict freedom of speech in order to preserve security in the state. The conflict has taken on a political dimension, with the opposition candidate and party in the 2007 gubernatorial (and 2008 gubernatorial re-run) elections being labeled "pro-Shi'a." Post will continue to monitor this situation.
END SUMMARY.

12. (C) Bello Wurno (protect), Chief Whip of the Sokoto State House of Assembly, told Poloffs on February 25 that he is alarmed by what he called a "witch hunt" of Shi'a followers in Sokoto State. Wurno told Poloffs the current government of Sokoto Governor Magatakarda Wamakko is using public sentiment against Shi'ites as a political tool. He maintained that the police have arrested large numbers of Shi'ites, including all the primary leadership of the sect. According to Wurno, Wamakko set up a Religious Committee to identify and arrest Shi'a followers. Wurno said that those merely accused of being Shi'a supporters often lose their jobs, salaries and pensions. He termed the situation as "very dangerous" and maintained non-Shi'ites are also now being fingered by those pursuing economic or personal vendettas. Further complicating the situation, Wurno alleged that those (like himself) in a position to speak out were fearful of being labeled Shi'a supporters and losing their positions. He relayed the story of two young men (faithful Sunnis who regularly attended mosque, he maintained) who were accused of being Shi'ites, which led to their salaries being stopped. He said he was unable to intervene on their behalf because of fear that he would be labeled a Shi'ite as well. Instead, their only recourse was to appeal to their imam and

their local government chairman (both of whom would know them and know they are Sunni) to write letters attesting to their religious affiliation.

13. (C) On February 20, Adamu Sifawa (protect), Secretary to the State Council of Chiefs and Emir's Council, told Poloffs and PolAssistant that the PDP labeled the Sokoto DPP opposition candidate (Maigari Dingyadi) as Shi'a in the run up to the 2007 gubernatorial and 2008 re-run gubernatorial elections. Sifawa claimed that Wamakko (previously Deputy Governor under the DPP, but who decamped to PDP for the 2007 elections) was now mounting a campaign against the Shi'ites to build popularity among the predominantly Sunni population and further distance himself from the former DPP governor. Sifawa told us that Wamakko had successfully demolished the Shi'a Mouzahara (secretariat) by jailing its leaders. Sifawa added that the traditional Sunni leadership in the state, the Sultan of Sokoto, "virtually sanctioned" the destruction of Shi'a neighborhoods under Wamakko.

14. (C) Deputy Chairman for the DPP in Sokoto, Muhammed Chiso (protect), reiterated Sifawa's claims that the PDP used the designation of the DPP party as pro-Shi'a for political motives in a meeting with Poloffs on February 24. Chiso also told Poloffs that Shi'a homes are regularly demolished, though he blamed the fears of their neighbors more than a concerted government-sponsored effort. Chiso said negative attitudes and fear of Shi'ites is so pervasive that there is no way to counter rumors and public opinion. Chiso told Poloffs before the 2007 election, DPP candidate Maigari Dingyadi swore on a copy of the Koran that he is not a member

ABUJA 00000386 002 OF 003

of any sect, but even this action had no effect on the rumors.

15. (C) Hassan Balarabe (protect), a member of a Sokoto-based non-governmental organization that works on the USAID-sponsored Conflict Abatement through Local Mediation project, told Poloffs on February 26 that many Shi'ites have fled Sokoto for Kaduna, Kano and Zaria. Although Balarabe recognized there was a serious conflict, he maintained that the situation was not as bad as the Shi'ites claim. He maintained that many Shi'ites were jailed, but that they had been causing unrest -- such as retaliating for the demolition of Shi'ite homes. The Shi'ites, he maintained, were also perpetuating reports of retribution for those who speak out in support of religious freedom. In addition, Balarabe told Poloffs that reports of non-payment of salaries were exaggerated; he claimed that many Shi'ites, once "outed" and known to their colleagues, stopped going to work claiming fear of reprisals, and that this was the reason for their dismissal. Without showing up at work, he maintained, they had no claim to receive their salaries.

16. (C) Sokoto Deputy Governor Mukhtari Shagari (protect) told Poloffs on February 25 that there are Shi'a groups freely operating in Sokoto, noting that the constitution protects freedom of religion. He stressed, however, that the constitution protects freedom of peaceful practice of religion. The state is "vigilant," he told Poloffs, but reassured that there is "nothing to fear." Dr. Ahmad Gada (protect), professor of Islamic Studies at Usmanu Danfodiyo University in Sokoto, told Poloffs that there is "no persecution or human rights abuses of Shi'ites" in Sokoto State." He argued that freedom of speech must have limits, especially when it comes to religious issues. Gada pointed to a need to maintain security in the state. He told Poloffs he realizes that politicians are using the Sunni-Shi'a conflict for political purposes; however, he maintained this was common around the world.

Statistics from Shi'a Leaders

17. (C) Balarabe showed Poloffs a list of 246 Shi'ites whose homes or businesses were demolished, burnt or looted in Sokoto and of 131 Shi'ites reportedly jailed in Sokoto (no

indication was given of the time period during which the lists were compiled). The list of homes was broken down by ward, with most of the destruction occurring in the Marmaron Garo, Gidawa, and Nufawa wards. Balarabe cautioned Poloffs that he cannot confirm the numbers on the lists and noted that many of the demolitions may be the result of personal disputes rather than religious persecution. (Comment: Post is unable to verify these claims independently. End comment.)

History and Roots of the Conflict

18. (C) According to Dr. Gada, the root of the Sunni-Shi'a conflict in Sokoto state arises from the Shi'a practice of not congregating in a Shi'a mosque but, rather, preaching in Sunni and other mosques before prayers and attempting to proselytize followers to the Shi'a sect. In the Nigerian context, he argued that Shi'ites are not strictly followers of Iranian-style Shi'a teachings. Rather, they question the authority of traditional Nigerian Sunni institutions and disagree on some specific beliefs. Gada said the number of Nigerian Shi'ites has been increasing since the early 1980s, when it gained a following among young college students. (Comment: One of the institutions which the Shi'ites question is the Sultan of Sokoto, which may give some context to the allegation that the Sultan "virtually sanctioned" destruction of Shi'a homes. End Comment)

19. (C) The present day conflict seems to have begun in 2007. Sunni cleric Umar Danmaishiyya was killed on July 18, 2007. Balarabe told Poloff a cellular telephone was reportedly found at the scene and when the crowd called the last number dialed, a well-known Shi'ite answered. (Note: We have no confirmation of this alleged evidence. End Note.) Balarabe says violence erupted against the Shi'ites and then the

ABUJA 00000386 003 OF 003

Shi'ites retaliated. Also in 2007, a Sunni imam who was reportedly preaching anti-Shi'a teachings and leading groups demolishing Shi'ite homes was ordered arrested by then Governor Bafarawa. In an attempt to calm religious tensions, Bafarawa made several public statements reminding citizens of the constitutional protection of freedom of religion. Wurno told Poloffs that Bafarawa even suggested that the Shi'ites build their own mosque as a way to reduce tensions. It appears that these public statements are the genesis of the rumors that Bafarawa (and hence the DPP) were pro-Shi'a. When Bafarawa refused to support the candidacy of his Deputy, Wamakko, for governor, Wamakko decamped to the PDP. Wamakko's campaign against the Shi'a, we were told by Wurno, Sifawa, and Chiso, stems from his efforts to distance himself from Bafarawa's former government.

Comment:

10. (C) Comment: We can see no reason why Wurno would stand to gain from exaggerating the current situation. Rather, we believe of all the people with whom we spoke, Wurno is probably most at liberty to voice his opinion on the current situation freely. Wurno is a PDP politician with strong ties to the national PDP rather than to Wamakko and the state-level party structure. He served as Personal Assistant to PDP National Chairman Aliyu prior to leaving Abuja to run for State Assembly in Sokoto. He lived in Abuja from 1999 to 2007.

11. (C) Comment Continued: Although Wurno's account of the situation is clearly more dire than others', we believe there is clear evidence for the demolition of Shi'ites' homes and arrest of Shi'a leaders. What is less clear is the extent to which the demolitions are part of a coordinated campaign by the Wamakko government, as opposed to the work of independent neighborhood groups. It is, in any case, clear that the Wamakko government is doing little to nothing to stem the violence and mitigate tensions between the two groups. As in other areas, we see the religious differences of the Sunni and Shi'a followers in Sokoto used as a tool for political

gain, and most likely a means of drawing attention away from the failings of government. Post will continue to monitor this situation carefully. End Comment.

112. (U) This cable was coordinated with Consulate Lagos.
SANDERS